

# **TWENTYSIX HYDROCARBON BLOCKS**

**CRAIG RITCHIE**

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# BEHIND THE LOOKING GLASS: AMAZONIA AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF GLOBAL CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

MIGUEL N. ALEXIADES

*The more things change, the more they remain the same*  
(Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1848)

In the fifty years that have passed since *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was published, much, and yet little, has changed. Daily life in America, and increasingly elsewhere, continues to be dominated by a socio-cultural fixation on consumption. And now, like then, the spiral of consumption-driven economic development and technological innovation continues to rely almost entirely on the decomposed remains of trillions of organisms that lived and died over 650 million years ago.<sup>2</sup> The technological innovation that has gone hand-in-hand with industrialization and modernization has shaped our ability to transform the world as well as our ability to see, understand and imagine it. Developments in microscopy, telescoping, digital, satellite and remote sensing technology, for example, allow us to see worlds inside, around and beyond us; places, scales and dimensions that were invisible or inaccessible a few decades or even years ago. Such a revolution in seeing can instill in us a sense of awe and admiration in the power and reach of our modern gaze.<sup>3</sup> We should, however, also consider what such images might fail to reveal or what behind them we may – wittingly or unwittingly – attempt to conceal. The complex dynamic between what we see and notice and what we don't may be one reason why, as John Berger reminds us, “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled”.<sup>4</sup>

Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, first published in 1963, invited viewers to see things in new ways by presenting an unflinching view of the ordinary; an ordinary which, as anthropologists remind us, often becomes invisible precisely through its ubiquity. Photographs and images can at times, like anthropology, make us see, and appreciate the mundane in new ways, awaking us from the slumber that the everyday and ever-present can draw us into.<sup>5</sup> For some, the banal, empty landscapes of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* serve as a mirror of sorts; a critique of the socially alienating effects of modernity and consumption. Yet, as a product of its time, Ruscha's book and the social commentary around it, from my perspective at least, also reflect a certain modernist bias in their own fascination with consumption. Standing amidst the unfolding disaster of the global environmental crisis, a post-modern critique of mass consumption is necessarily drawn to another of the huge historical contradictions of industrialization; the disconnects that are created between the processes and acts of consumption and production.<sup>6</sup>

The way in which the relations between production, consumption and subsequent disposal of resources have become socially disconnected or made invisible may be one of the hallmarks of modernity, one of the changeable unchangeables of Karr's epigram.<sup>7</sup> It is a disconnect that was brought home to me one particular evening in an Italian restaurant in New York, shortly after having returned from living with my family for over a year with the Amazonian Ese Eja. Upon being served the steak he had ordered, and following a distinctly Ese Eja sense of protocol, our six year-old son asked a very confused waiter who had killed that particular animal. Among

the Ese Eja, where most meat is procured through hunting and shared through a complex system of delayed reciprocity and exchange that characterises many indigenous subsistence economies, knowing who hunted and shared what and when, is part of a daily mental tab-keeping and social accounting process through which relations of production and consumption are maintained. Social relations underpin the procurement (read production) of game as much as its consumption. The act of hunting is premised on complex game of seduction and exchange with forest animals whose animal form hides an underlying shared humanity. Deeply embedded in a matrix of social-environmental relations, hunting and the acts that follow are mediated by a set of rules and values. Hunters must, for example, refrain from having sexual intercourse until all the meat has been eaten, otherwise the meat becomes polluted and dangerous to consume. Knowing who killed the animal you are about to eat is crucially important in this regard as your health and life, quite literally, is in the hunter's hands.<sup>8</sup>

Dimitri's question, as an attempt to understand the broader context of his steak – knowing who had gifted it and who to hold responsible in case he got sick from eating it – was of course quite absurd in this very different setting. And yet, precisely because of its dislocation, his question brought to the fore the extent to which acts of production and consumption have become alienated from each other and alienating to all those involved. Not only did we not know the who, where, how and when of the killing of the animal that was in Dimitri's plate; we also did not know who brought it to the restaurant, who cooked it and, indeed, hardly even knew the person who brought it to our table. Such profound disengagement between the people and the acts of production and consumption that sustain daily life would be unthinkable in an Ese Eja community, at least until recently. By the same token, the extent to which we are all detached from the dynamics and consequences that lie, before, after and behind each of our acts of consumption, is one of the greatest blessings and tragedies of our time.

Through its ironic juxtaposition to Ruscha's work, Ritchie's *Twentysix Hydrocarbon Blocks* prompts us to think about what lies behind our individual and collective acts of consumption.<sup>9</sup> What, to continue with the example of the gasoline station, had to happen, to what peoples, beings and places for the gasoline which powers the world's one billion cars, to be produced and shipped? Among the things that have happened is that as the most abundant and/or readily accessible supplies of oil and other natural resources are depleted, more and more marginal deposits need to be exploited. Rising energy prices has led to a scramble among cash-starved, biodiversity-rich countries to auction their fossil fuel reserves. For example, in just two years, between 2004 and 2005, the percentage of the Peruvian Amazon held in concessions for oil and gas exploration went from 13% to 70%.<sup>10</sup>

One reason why our acts of consumption become so alienated from those related acts of production and disposal is that the largest (richest) consumers rarely have to directly incur or experience many of their damaging consequences. Many of the costs of consumption are, to use the jargon of economics, externalized; imposed on nature, on other (poorer) parts of the world and other (poorer) people. Extracting oil and gas from inaccessible or fragile landscapes – be they the depths of the ocean, the Arctic or the Amazon – is a risky business, but the brunt of the risks are of course not distributed equally. Those living closer to the areas of production, human

and non-human alike, bear the brunt of the risks and the consequences, and they often have little recourse to resist, protest or protect themselves. In the Peruvian Amazon alone, for example, 46 out of 52 (88%) active hydrocarbon concessions overlap with titled indigenous lands and 17 of these are in existing or proposed reserves for extremely vulnerable isolated populations.<sup>11</sup> Just within the 26 hydrocarbon blocks featured in this book there are 32 separate indigenous groups speaking 11 different languages. Setting aside for a moment concerns around biodiversity and environmental degradation, the direct implications of these activities to the physical and social well being to these communities, including some of the last highly isolated and most vulnerable indigenous societies left on earth, are obvious.<sup>12</sup>

Through the use of sophisticated remote sensing, mapping and imaging technology PeruPetro<sup>13</sup> produce and maintain a series of maps whose effect is to visually project an image of a highly ordered and organized national territory, with clearly demarcated use zones and bounded, self-enclosed areas, including those set aside for oil and gas exploration and extraction. The way in which remote-sensing and mapping technology enables certain people to represent nature as fundamentally constituted by a series of overlapping objects with discrete boundaries and distributions brings to mind Aime Cesaire's remark that historically and ontologically, colonization has entailed a process of "thingification".<sup>14</sup> By focusing primarily on the tangible materiality and economic value of the 'objects' that we can see as constituting the world – be these a steak, gasoline, or, indeed, 'nature' – we can easily lose sight of the relations and processes through which these have come to be.

For the Ese Eja, like many other indigenous societies, the living and non-living objects that constitute reality are first and foremost the product of social relations. In contrast to the modern world-view, which collapses human-natural interactions into a series of hierarchically ordered subject-object relations, the indigenous universe is realised through the complex, fluid and dynamic interaction and intersection of multiple subjects. Such a perspective, one which recognises the intersubjective nature of our engagement with the world around us, could give us a new and productive way through which to view and understand the past and future of Amazonian Peru's astounding diversity of life forms and languages.<sup>15</sup> It is a perspective that, to me at least, is brought into sharp relief in this book through the ironic contrast offered by its opposite; an assortment of names and objects whose meaning, with regard to themselves as well as in relation to each other, appears at first glance indecipherable. The images that follow serve, in this reader's mind at least, as a parody of the modern project of objectifying nature and disassembling it into what some would like us to consider are its key constitutive parts, creating a disorientating assemblage of objects completely disconnected from time, place and networks of relationships.

The process of disconnecting Amazonian 'nature' from its broader social and historical context is part and parcel of how Europeans and neo-Europeans have historically represented the region and justified its colonization. Ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Europeans first began to wander into lowland Amazonia, this region has been construed as a wilderness – a place formed of primeval nature and cultures that until recently remained disconnected from the rest of the world, from history and from human civilization. In contrast to this romantic view, there

is very strong evidence – archaeological, historical, ecological, botanical and anthropological – that Amazonia, like pretty much any other inhabited region in this world, has had a complex and turbulent social history, a history which involved the pre-colonial creation of vast networks of regional and trans-regional exchange between a complex network of societies displaying a vast diversity of social and political systems.<sup>16</sup> Since colonial times Amazonian history has been characterized by numerous waves of demographic, ethnic, economic, social and political disruptions and subsequent reconfigurations; a process which is visible today in the rich tapestry of socio-ecological forms and interactions that characterize the region.

The image of Amazonia as a historically constituted space, as a nature formed through the complex and shifting interweaving of social and ecological relations and as a place clearly formed within, and not without, the realm of human activity and society in all of its complexity, stands in marked contrast to the Amazonian archetype of the European imaginary and to the myth of the ‘empty Amazon.’ This stereotyped image has been used strategically throughout modern history to justify colonization and the strategic appropriation of lands, labour and resources.<sup>17</sup> Ritchie’s carefully assembled images and their juxtaposed fragments of information and metadata should encourage us to think about what these different images of Amazonia mean in relation to our social imaginary and its relationship to our turbulent past and future.

1. I am grateful to Craig Ritchie for inviting me to submit this piece and for his many helpful comments, and to Meg Berlin, Joaquín Carrizosa, Daniela Peluso, Kristin Ruppel and especially David Hennig for their feedback on the drafts.

2. While the powerful dialectic that exists between population growth, technological innovation and ability to capture and transform ever-increasing amounts of energy and resources from the environment can be traced to the rise Neolithic revolution and the spread of agriculture around 12,000 years ago, the scale, rate and consequences of those changes have rapidly accelerated since the industrial revolution just over two centuries ago; so much so that a formal review process is currently underway to design this latter period as a new geological era; the Anthropocene. According to Paul Crutzen, the Nobel laureate atmospheric chemist and advocate of the term’s use, the start of this era would coincide with the invention of the steam engine in 1784. [Crutzen, P. 2006, The “Anthropocene”, p. 13-18 in Ehlers, E., and T. Krafft, eds. *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*. Springer: Berlin].

3. In his 2008 book *Geography and Vision: Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World*, Denis Cosgrove examines the historical transformations in the dynamics of sight, imagination and representation of geographical space throughout modernity. The evolving dynamic, like modernity itself, is a process mediated and facilitated by technology. Consider for example the photo of the Earth as seen from 6.4 billion kilometers away, taken by Voyager 1 in 1990. The image of our entire planet as a mere pixel – a barely visible pale blue dot suspended in the vast universe – marked a new watershed in our ability to see and imagine ourselves and our world, and was used with powerful effect as an allegory of fragility and ephemerality in Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth*.

4. Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, p. 7.

5. An important role for anthropology is to examine and explore those things that “go without saying” (Bloch 2001), precisely because they lie at the core of everyday experience and as such constitute a fundamental, yet so assumed as to become an invisible part of social reality. It is often easier to do this as an outsider, precisely because what may be obvious and self-evident to an insider may stand out to an outsider and require explanation [Bloch, M. 2001. ‘What goes without saying: the conceptualisation of Zafimaniry society’, p. 22-37 in A. Kuper, ed., *Conceptualising Society*. Routledge: London].

6. The disconnect that follows from the industrial revolution had distinct spatial, social and environmental dimensions which are illustrated by, for example, the emerging contrasts between ‘town’ and ‘country’, the tensions formed along class, gender, ethnic and regional divisions, and the profound contradiction created by an economic system which undermines the conditions of production through resource degradation [Foster, J.B. 2002. ‘Capitalism and ecology: the nature of the contradiction’, *Monthly Review* 54(4):6-16].

7. Karr, Jean-Baptiste A. *Les Guêpes* (Paris), January 1849, p. 305, in: Karr, A. 1859. *Les Guêpes*, Sixième Série. Paris.

8. The Amazonian view of the universe as a densely populated space animated by a complex intersecting network of subjects with variable visible outer forms (some, like plants and animals, visibly animate; some, like rocks, planets or water bodies less visibly so) but shared inner, invisible, quite human, attributes (subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality, emotions, desires, etc.), contrasts with a worldview shaped by modern dichotomies: nature-culture,

object-subject, etc. [Descola, P. 2005. 'Ecology as cosmological analysis', p. 22-35 in *The Land Within: Indigenous Territory and the Perception of the Environment*. Copenhagen, IWGIA; Latour, B. 1993. 'We Have Never Been Modern'. Harvard University Press; Viveiros de Castro, E. 2005. 'Perspectivism and multinaturalism in indigenous America', p. 36-74 in *The Land Within: Indigenous Territory and the Perception of the Environment*. Copenhagen, IWGIA].

9. Such connection is clearly articulated poetically by Neruda, "my life is made of all lives" or metaphysically by Nhat Hanh's aphorism "in this plate of food I clearly see the suffering of the world". We should take note in the fact that such suffering in the world is not borne equally by all its inhabitants. Nor can these contradictions be erased through simple adjustments in our consumption patterns, as noted by Žižek in his biting critique of charity, green labeling and cultural capitalism. See <http://youtu.be/hpAMbpQ8J7g>

10. See Finer et al. 2008. 'Oil and gas projects in the western Amazon: threats to wilderness, biodiversity and indigenous peoples', *PLoS ONE* 3(8):e2932.

11. See Finer and Orta-Martínez 2010. According to estimates cited in a recent United Nations report there are about 200 groups of indigenous people living in conditions of high isolation in Amazonia. Far from being the 'lost tribes of the stone age' portrayed by the popular media (e.g. Mansey 2009), these groups have actively sought throughout recent history to distance themselves from the economic frontiers of national and global economies, and in order to do so have retreated to what until recently were highly inaccessible regions. Many of these groups, and especially those living in the western Amazonian fringe, are currently threatened by a new wave of large-scale development and hydrocarbon exploration. Their existence and, more pertinently, their future and survival, presents formidable moral, ethical, legal, political and logistical challenges to government and non-government groups committed to defending their right to self-determination, particularly in light of their extreme social and immunological vulnerability (see Parellada 2013, also [www.uncontactedtribes.org](http://www.uncontactedtribes.org)). Half of the 26 blocks included in this book overlap with such groups. [Finer, M. and M. Orta-Martínez 2010. 'A second hydrocarbon boom threatens the Peruvian Amazon: trends, projections, and policy implications', *Environmental Research Letters* 5(1):1-10; Mansey, K. 2009, 'Stone-Age Hunter Tribe Found in Amazon – pics', *Mirror Online*, 19 April 2009; Parellada, A. 2013. *Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact*, Copenhagen, IWGIA].

12. Anticona C. et al. 2011. 'Lead exposure in indigenous communities of the Amazon basin, Peru', *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health* 215(1):59-63; Napolitano, D. and A. Ryan 2007. 'The dilemma of contact: voluntary isolation and the impacts of gas exploitation on health and rights in the Kugapakori Nahua Reserve, Peruvian Amazon', *Environmental Research Letters* 2, 4; Orta Martínez, M. et al. 2007. 'Impacts of petroleum activities for the Achuar people of the Peruvian Amazon: summary of existing evidence and research gaps', *Environmental Research Letters* 2, 4; San Sebastián, M. and A. Hurtig 2005. 'Oil development and health in the Amazon basin of Ecuador: the popular epidemiology process', *Social Science and Medicine* 60(4):799-807.

13. PeruPetro is the State agency that promotes and manages Peru's hydrocarbon reserves and negotiates contracts with oil companies. The maps produced and used by PeruPetro as part of its bidding rounds were used by Ritchie to assemble the base shapes in the spreads of *Twentysix Hydrocarbon Blocks*.

14. Césaire, A. 1972. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press: New York and London, p. 6.

15. The Peruvian Amazon is one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth and the second largest area of the Amazon after Brazil. These forests are lived in and actively managed by about 60 different indigenous groups, including 15 groups living in voluntary isolation (Finer and Orta-Martínez 2010). Also embedded in these landscapes is an astounding array of living forms. The extraordinary biodiversity of tropical forests has become one of the tropes of modern-day environmentalism: for example, as many species of birds (526) live in the forests surrounding a biological station in Madre de Dios, southeastern Amazonian Peru, as in the whole of Europe. Similarly, a single hectare of lowland tropical forest in many sites along western Amazonia have as many species of trees – 150 to 300 – as the entirety of Europe. [Finer, M. and M. Orta-Martínez 2010. 'A second hydrocarbon boom threatens the Peruvian Amazon: trends, projections, and policy implications', *Environmental Research Letters* 5(1):1-10; Gentry, A. 1988. 'Tree species richness of upper Amazonian forests', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 85:156-159; Terborgh, J. et al. 1984. *Annotated checklist of bird and mammal species of Cocha Cashu biological station, Manu National Park, Peru*. Chicago: Museum of Natural History].

16. Balée, W. and C. Erickson, eds. 2006. *Time and Complexity in Historical Ecology: Studies in the Neotropical Lowlands*. New York: Columbia University Press; Denevan, W. 2001. *Cultivated Landscapes of Native Amazonia*. Oxford University Press; Heckenberger et al. 2003. 'Amazonia 1492: pristine forest or cultural parkland?', *Science* 301(5640):1710-1714].

17. During colonial times the image of a vast wilderness devoid of civilization, history and morality was used by the Spanish and Portuguese crowns to legitimise their claims over vast territories that until then had been controlled by a wide arrange of indigenous polities, establishing a network of missionary and agro-extractive centres linked to the mercantile economy of the time. We find a similar rhetoric behind the dramatic, and often violent, intrusion of corporate forest extractivist entrepreneurs during the 19th century in the midst of the economic opportunities presented by the industrial revolution in Europe and North America. The massive modernization and nation-building projects of the 20th century also leant on the same ideas, upholding the large-scale extraction of natural resources by a national corporate class with good political connections. Development in Amazonia today is heralded, in line with the neoliberal stage of globalization, as a modernizing project driven by transnational corporate interests through mineral and oil and gas exploration, hydro-electric energy provision and large-scale agri-business.

## NOTES

Spectral biodiversity imagery obtained from [westernamazon.org](http://westernamazon.org) and is derived from species range data distributed by NatureServe, the IUCN Global Mammal Assessment, and the IUCN Global Amphibian Assessment.

Shapefile data for the hydrocarbon blocks and protected areas is derived from PeruPetro's 2008 bidding round DVD, updated via their website to incorporate recent additions and changes. PeruPetro are a Peruvian government agency with financial and administrative autonomy responsible for hydrocarbon contract negotiation and signing, as well as overseeing contract execution and promoting exploration and production of investment opportunities in Peru. The organization operates according to objectives, policies, and strategies established by Peru's energy and mines ministry. For further information on PeruPetro's hydrocarbon activities visit [www.perupetro.com.pe](http://www.perupetro.com.pe)

Indigenous territorial data obtained from Instituto del Bien Común (Common Good Institute), a Peruvian non-profit civil association organisation founded in 1998 that works with rural communities to promote optimal management of common goods, such as communal lands, water bodies, forests, fisheries and protected areas. The IBC works on large landscapes of the Andean Amazon where they develop projects relating to the management and territorial planning, governance, care of the commons, environmental conservation, sustainable development, respect for the rights and cultures of indigenous and non-indigenous groups, and scientific and local knowledge. They maintain a territorial database of Peru, detailing ethnic and linguistic groups, communities, and land title status.

The Peruvian government's official list of national indigenous groups and languages can be found at <http://bdpi.cultura.gob.pe/lista-de-pueblos-indigenas>

Miguel Alexiades, ethnobotanist and environmental anthropologist, has worked and lived extensively among the Ese Eja, an indigenous group living on the border regions of Peru and Bolivia, over the past thirty years. His work and publications focus on a number of theoretical and practical issues relating to the historical and political dimensions of indigenous environmental knowledge and practices. He is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Kent's School of Anthropology and Conservation and co-director of *People and Plants International*.

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